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IDENTIFIERS Durkin (Dolores); Reading Fluency

ABSTRACT

Noting that some elementary school children may have difficulty learning to read using basal readers, this paper describes the successful implementation of the Big Books for Beginning Readers reading program in a California elementary school. The first section of the paper discusses the problems students were having with reading, including a lack of success in phonics and skill activities, and a need for a more detailed and descriptive vocabulary. The second section reviews the literature pertinent to the problem, and stresses Durkin's research on the bedtime story cycle, while the third section details the Big Books program, which is based on New Zealand's Shared Book Experience program. The section discusses the methods by which students became more interested and fluent readers, including having familiar books read to them, joining in on often repeated phrases, and involving parents by having them make Big Books and helping with the children's reading at home. The fourth section examines the process of implementing the Big Books model, including adapting the materials to the school's beginning reading in Spanish program, while the final section evaluates the program, offering positive comments from the school's reading teachers. (References for English and Spanish Big Books, 14 references for teachers, and names of persons to contact for more information are included.) (JC)

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BIG BOOKS FOR BEGINNING READERS

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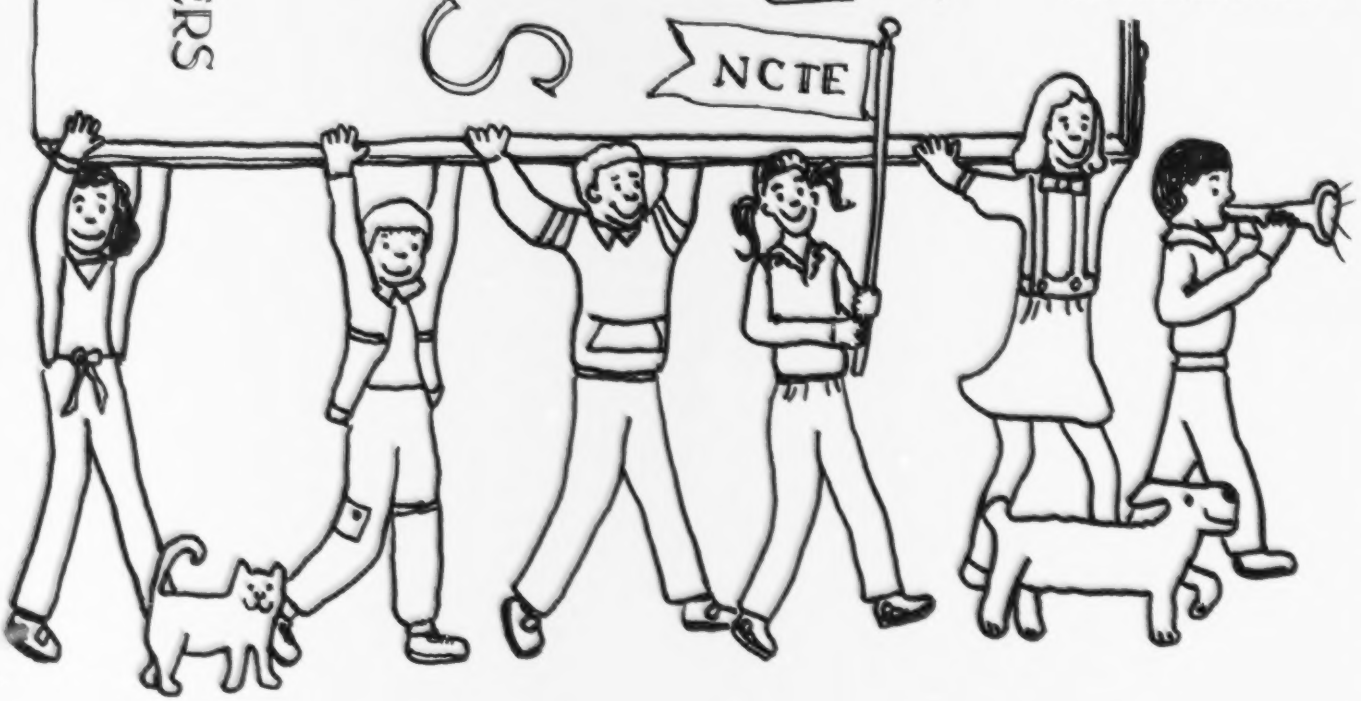

BELL GARDENS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
MONTEBELLO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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BACKGROUND:

"Big Books for Beginning Readers" started in the summer of 1984 at Bell Gardens Elementary School in the Montebello Unified School District. Principal John Myers had been reviewing student achievement data and noticed consistently low reading levels for first and second grade students in the English reading program. At these levels, approximately 33% of students are in English reading and 66% in Spanish. The school is located in a very economically depressed area.

A needs assessment was conducted to find out what the teachers of English reading felt were the problems in their present basal reading approach. Two major concerns emerged. The first was that teachers as well as students reported frustration in using a total basal approach. The students just were not successful in doing the phonics, skill activities, or even in reading the stories. The second problem identified was the students' need for more oral language development. Teachers felt their students needed to develop a more detailed and descriptive vocabulary for an ever-expanding range of interests and concepts.

After needs assessment data was studied, classroom observations were made during reading time to get a clearer view of the problem. Then, a

RESEARCH FINDINGS

considerable amount of time and effort was spent reviewing relevant research studies. The findings and generalizations from this research became the foundation of the program.

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

The following information was compiled from research literature and used as the theoretical basis of "Big Books for Beginning Readers."

❀ BEDTIME STORY CYCLE ❀

The bedtime story cycle, in which a parent or older sibling reads with a child, is known to produce early readers (Durkin, 1966). A number of events take place between parent and child which promote literacy. The adult models the real experience of reading and provides a situation that is socially rewarding and pleasurable to both the child and the parent. The child also gains experience in handling books, along with the reading process itself. Both parent and child have a role in determining what is read. As the child's familiarity with a story increases, he may join in by chanting recurring elements, thus becoming an active participant.

Children's literature for bedtime story reading is often characterized by stories which contain structural patterns. These structures include (1) repetitive patterns, in which a certain phrase is repeated at various points in the story as in Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?; (2) repetitive-cumulative patterns, in which a phrase is repeated in each segment and new phrases are added to the sequence as in The House That Jack Built; (3) rhyming patterns as in nursery rhymes; (4) patterns based on a familiar cultural sequence as in counting books; and (5) predictable plots as in fairy tales (Bridge et al, 1983). These structures make it easy for children to predict what comes next when they

RESEARCH FINDINGS

read, a behavior exhibited by proficient readers.

One possible key to a successful reading program would be to create a model in which students must use strategies similar to those that take place during the bedtime story cycle. This has rarely been tried in the schools.

⚙ EARLY READERS ⚙

Durkin (1966) studied first graders who had learned to read at home in the bedtime story cycle and found that the common factors which produced early readers did not include ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Rather, they included oral reading by adults or siblings, with favorite story books being read over and over. Also very important was their informal talking about the stories, which enriched the child's comprehension about a variety of topics. Durkin found that certain personality factors such as curiosity, persistence, and self-reliance had a bearing on early reading development and that these were traits which can be fostered by a classroom reading program.

Allington, (1970, 1980, 1983) studied the distinguishing characteristics of good, as opposed to poor, readers in

RESEARCH FINDINGS

school and found overwhelmingly that the good readers were ones who were read to at home. He also studied the differential treatment of good versus poor readers by their teachers. He found that with poor readers, teachers had a tendency to focus on accuracy (getting the words exactly right), sounding out difficult words, phonics skills, and correcting any deviation from the printed text, no matter how close in meaning. As a result, Allington found, these less proficient readers viewed reading as a matter of accuracy, believing that good readers don't make mistakes. In the classroom, poor readers actually spent very little time reading. The majority of their time was spent doing skill activities that have very little to do with the reading process itself. When asked why they read, poor readers said it was because the teacher requested it; reading was always for the purpose of pleasing an adult rather than for anything intrinsically rewarding about the process itself.

In contrast to poor readers, Allington found that with proficient readers, teachers had a tendency to focus on meaning and expression. They would even ignore a miscue (Goodman term, acknowledging that "mistakes" are prompted or cued for good reason by the interaction of reader with text) if its meaning was consistent with the story. As a result, these children knew

that people naturally made miscues when reading, because reading was a matter of getting meaning from the printed page. These students indicated that they read for enjoyment rather than because the teacher requested it. They were risk-takers and self-correctors, monitoring what they read as

❀ PROFICIENT READERS ❀

they went along. Good readers often read easy books in their free time, something poorer readers never had the chance to do, since all the material they were exposed to was on their instructional level.

Other possible keys to a successful reading program would be to create a teaching model in which students spend a maximum amount of time reading and a minimum amount of time working on isolated skills and phonics. The teaching strategies would include directing students to focus on meaning and enjoyment rather than on accuracy. Students would develop self reliance in discovering the meaning of unfamiliar words. This process could be facilitated by a careful selection of highly predictable materials for instruction.

After reviewing additional studies in the areas of integration of the language arts, fluency in beginning reading, and miscues and how to deal with them, the staff was ready to put together a new reading program. The program really put theory into practice.

THE PROGRAM

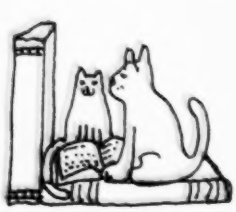
THE PROGRAM:

"Big Books for Beginning Readers" is based on the "Shared Book Experience" (Holdaway, 1979) being implemented in New Zealand, the most literate country in the world (Anderson et al, 1985). Many changes and adaptations were made to fit the unique needs of Bell Gardens Elementary School students.

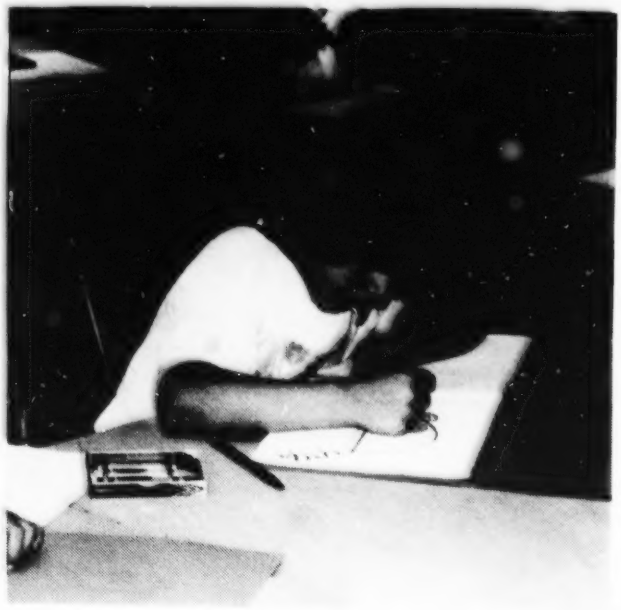
Oversized "Big Books" are used for a shared-book experience that allows for all students to see the words and watch the pages as the teacher reads. As she reads, the teacher encourages children to chime in or to recite the often-repeated refrain that is typical of the predictably structured books chosen for the project. As a result, even non-readers or students who are having difficulty learning to read can experience success at reading a real book.

The "Shared Book Experience" attempts to recreate in the classroom the "lap method" of reading. Since many Bell Gardens' students were not from "book rich" homes, they had not had the experience of sitting in an adult's lap and being read to. Reading the "Big Books" is done in a relaxed and non-threatening manner, and students are allowed the repetition they would get with a favorite story at home. A class will spend one to two weeks on a story, quite a different situation from the traditional ways of teaching reading, where students see a story only once or twice.

In addition, each classroom has eight trade books of the same book from which the Big Book was made. As the students work in centers, they may read the story in pairs or hear the story on tape as they follow along in the small books. The teacher-made tapes direct students to echo-read pages and then read the entire book aloud. Teachers have reported that during sustained silent reading time, the regular-sized copies of the "Big Books"



THE PROGRAM

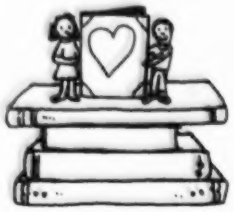


are selected by students most of the time.

This method of teaching reading fosters fluent reading, as opposed to the halting style of reading often noticed in beginning readers. Students hear the story read with expression by the teacher and on tape, as well as having the opportunity to join in choral reading, paired reading, and echo reading. All this contributes to fluency.

Writing and skill activities are also an important part of the program. Children write their own books and stories related to the Big Book theme. Skills are introduced only after the children are familiar with the story. Children use sentence strips and sight word cards to match with the text and reconstruct the story line by line. A simple beginning sound phonics activity is used with each book. The children use picture dictionaries to "research" words that begin alike.

Parents are also involved in the program. Not only have they as volunteers helped to make "Big Books," but they are helping their children by reading with them at home. The students receive comprehension books (text only) in their classrooms. They illustrate the story, take it home and practice reading with their parents or siblings.



Teaching strategies are designed to encourage the behavior that proficient readers exhibit in relation to errors. To promote risk-taking, teachers seek to create a

climate of acceptance and encouragement by rewarding good guesses, right or wrong, providing opportunities for rehearsal before oral reading (Samuels, 1977), and encouraging choral reading.

To help students with self-monitoring, teachers repeat what the child has read when he runs into difficulty and help him to focus on and repair the part that didn't make sense. Replacement sentences are used to demonstrate how a child can continue reading when he comes to an unknown word.

TEACHERS AVOID TELLING

To encourage self-correction, teachers avoid supplying the correct response or allowing prompting from other students. The reader is encouraged to use the context to get the meaning by taking a re-run (i.e., starting the sentence over), reading on, using the picture, or using phonics cues. Independence is fostered, so students understand that it is their responsibility for getting the meaning.

THE PROCESS:

The process of implementing the "Big Book" program can serve as a model for others. Bell Gardens Elementary started with a real need expressed by both principal and teachers. After a more formal needs assessment and classroom visitations, the district reading-language arts consultant reviewed relevant research. This information was compiled and presented to the staff along with a tentative program model.

After much discussion, general agreement was reached about the actual program. The model was then put into practice with one group of students to test for any problems

inherent in the model. Schoolwide implementation began only after all the bugs were worked out and all materials had arrived at the school. Management of the program then fell upon the school project director.

It is important to note that the principal was involved at every stage of the process. His role as instructional leader showed teachers how much he valued early reading, as well as the "Big Book" model.

Throughout the process, teachers were given release days to work on the model and to develop materials. Monthly meetings were scheduled to deal with problems and to further teacher understanding in the area of beginning reading.

As teachers worked with students and tried the materials, adaptations were made. Two major changes occurred during the first year. All of the materials in use were geared to beginning readers, but the proficient readers wanted to read Big Books, too. The task for this coming year is finding titles of predictable books at higher reading levels to add to the program. A second change has concerned other teachers at the school who teach beginning reading in Spanish. They were hearing and observing such great things in the English reading classes that they wanted to be included. The district bilingual coordinator was approached and was enthusiastic about the model. The Spanish reading teachers were given release time and went through the same process as the original group with no difference other than

EVALUATION

a focus on Spanish books. This is really unusual since most teachers of Spanish reading use a phonetic approach almost exclusively. They saw that all of their students were not successful and wanted an approach that emphasized more whole language teaching. The "Big Book" program fits their needs. They started with their students in July of 1985, the month Bell Gardens' year round educational program begins.

EVALUATION:

An informal evaluation of "Big Book for Beginning Readers" was conducted at the end of the first year. Certain student behaviors were observed in classrooms. Here is a sample of representative comments made by teachers:

"There was a significant difference when I did Big Book lessons as compared to regular reading lessons. Students were enthusiastic about reading--very eager to learn."

❋ SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT ❋

"Non-readers felt a sense of accomplishment and had great pride in their ability to read the Big Book."

"Students utilized picture clues more accurately than they did with basal stories."

"Words with high interest level were retained, although some were very difficult."

"During sustained silent reading time, the trade book copies of Big Books were picked most of the time."

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NAME	AUTHOR	PUBLISHER
Bears on Wheels	Stan & Jan Berenstain	Random House
Brown Bear	Bill Martin, Jr.	Holt and Rinehart
A Great Day for Up	Dr. Seuss	Random House
He Bear She Bear	Stan & Jan Berenstain	Random House
I Can Build a House	Shigeo Watanabe	Philomel Books
I Went to The Market	Joseph Domjan	Holt and Rinehart
Inside Outside Upside Down	Stan & Jan Berenstain	Random House
It Looked Like Spilt Milk	Charles G. Shaw	Harper & Row
Old Hat New Hat	Stan & Jan Berenstain	Random House
Sam's Lamp	Barbro Lindgren	William Morrow
The Snake	Bernard Waber	Houghton Mifflin
Titch	Pat Hutchins	Macmillan
We Never Get to Do Anything	Martha Alexander	The Dial Press

REFERENCES

SPANISH BIG BOOKS

NAME	AUTHOR	PUBLISHER
¿Donde está Spot?	William Heinemann (Eric Hill - Spanish)	Edinormal LTDA. & CIA.
El sol	Linda Zierer Giles & Roger Salinas	Educational Activities, Inc.
Las Hormigas	" "	" "
Las Narices	" "	" "
¿Los Conoces?	Dan Porter (Rosa Flores -Spanish)	The Economy Company
Los Gatos	Linda Zierer & Roger Salinas	Educational Activities, Inc.
Max y la Bañera	Barbro Lindgren	Editorial Planeta
Max y el Coche	" "	" "
Max y la Lámpara	" "	" "
Max y el Osito	" "	" "
Max y el Pastelito	" "	" "
Max y la Pelota	" "	" "
Oso Café, Oso Café	Bill Martin, Jr.	Holt, Rinehart
Pajarito	Linda Zierer Giles & Roger Salinas	Educational Activities, Inc.
Parecia Leche Derramada	Charles G. Shaw	Harper & Row
Rabo de Gato	Mary Frances & Eliardo Franca (Translated by Veronica Uribe)	Editoria Ática
Un Cuento Curioso de Colores	Wylie	Children's Press
Un Cuento de un Pez Grande	"	" "
Una Función de Titeres	Sharon Peters	Troll Associates

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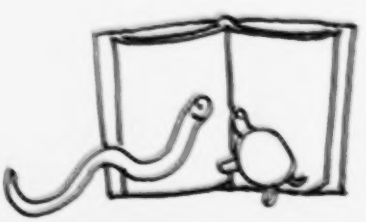

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